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A cool change, but what has Pope Francis actually achieved?

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Abstract

A year ago this week, the ageing, doctrinaire and aristocratic Pope, Benedict XVI, shocked keen Vatican watchers and the public alike by his sudden resignation. Few were prepared for the shockwaves that would follow.

The church had become embroiled in scandal after scandal: from corruption at the Vatican Bank through to its continuing refusal to deal with sexual abuse. It had lost, many would have thought irretrievably, what little relevance it still claimed in the contemporary world.

So nobody would have predicted that, less than a year later, Benedict's successor would be lauded as Person of the Year by both Time magazine and, even more surprisingly, the lesbian and gay newsweekly, The Advocate. Then one-time-youth-culture bible Rolling Stone's cover story earlier this year made it official: the man Gawker dubbed "cool Pope Francis" is a rock star.

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Pope Francis is yet to walk among, and embrace, the victims who have suffered at the hands of his brother priests. Tiziana Fabi/EPA

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Rolling Stone/EPA

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The contrast between the two Popes – the fiercely, conservative, [designer-slipper-wearing](#) Benedict and the no-nonsense Francis who refused to even move into the lavish Papal apartments – couldn't be starker.

But almost a year into Francis' new papacy (his papacy commenced on March 13, 2013) it's time to ask the serious question: has anything really changed?

The [damning UN report](#) that last week blasted the church for its slow and inadequate response to the sexual abuse of children by clergy, shows it will take [more than papal selfies](#) and a few [surprise phone calls](#) to turn the public fortunes of the church around.

According to the report by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

The committee is gravely concerned that the Holy See has not acknowledged the extent of the crimes committed, has not taken the necessary measures to address cases of child sexual abuse and to protect children, and has adopted policies and practices which have led to the continuation of the abuse by and the impunity of the perpetrators.

Late last year Francis announced that a [Vatican commission](#) would address sexual abuse in the Church, but over the course of his first year in office he has made little headway on this critical issue. As late as December of last year the Pope's representative in Australia and his bureaucrats in Rome, [were refusing](#) to hand over documents about clergy child abusers to the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into sex abuse, and only did so after the Commission went public about the refusal.

The UN Committee also reported [Vatican refusals](#) to requests for information during its inquiry.

Francis' actions have also failed to keep pace with his astute use of symbolic media opportunities. One of his most widely reported moments was [his statement](#), last July, about gay people:

If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?

In a [subsequent interview](#), published last September, he indicated that he didn't think it was his job to be constantly talking about same-sex marriage, abortion and contraception.



Time Magazine/EPA

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This is a radical change from Benedict who, when he was Pope John Paul's doctrine enforcer, [infamously wrote](#) that homosexuality was "intrinsically disordered" and "a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil".

But again, how does this translate on the ground? Maybe the cool Pope is sending signals, but are his foot soldiers picking them up?

It hasn't stopped the Spanish Cardinal, only recently appointed by the Pope, making statements so offensive that he is now being [investigated by local prosecutors](#) under anti-gay hate speech laws. The pope himself was reportedly "[shocked](#)" by Malta's proposed lesbian and gay-friendly adoption laws and encouraged the local Bishop to oppose them.

In October the Pope will convene a special [Synod](#) – or large gathering of church leaders – on the family and Catholics around the world have been invited to answer a preparatory questionnaire on divorce, contraception and sexuality.

Such an effort at consultation might seem like another step in opening up the church, but as Fairfax's religion correspondent Barney Zwartz [has pointed out](#), the very framing of the questionnaire – in terms of threats to the church – seems to indicate the opposite. Concern for "the family" has [long been used](#) by the religious right, both inside and outside the Catholic church, as code to promote a series of anti-gay and anti-women ideologies.

The German Bishops have used the responses to the questionnaire as an opportunity to [press for some reform](#). But the Germans are an exception.

The main factor mitigating against change in the church is that nearly all its current Bishops were appointed during the reigns of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, who, between them, had 35 years to install like-minded conservative leaders throughout the church. Virtually no progressive leaders from the [Vatican II reform generation](#) remain. While there are still small pockets of progressive resistance it has been hard to sustain against an active Vatican campaign to [stamp out dissent](#).



Alessandro Di Meo/EPA

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The Pope has also made positive statements about creating “[more space](#)” for women in the Church; but again he has taken no action to ensure any real changes enhance women’s participation in the church. In fact, as the author and journalist Angela Bonavoglia [has pointed out](#), the very way he talks about “women in the church” implicitly allocates them to “the place of a subgroup of human beings to designated corners of the institution”.

In his first year, Cool Pope Francis has made a big dent on the church’s image problem. But it is the next 12 months that will determine whether he can make a substantive difference to the arcane, [sometimes corrupt](#), and often oppressive way the church operates in the world. Key to this will be his personal leadership in finally taking responsibility for the Church’s disastrous record on sex abuse.

It is striking that, although he is obviously a man of deep compassion – he has reached out to all sorts of people, including [victims of rape](#) – Pope Francis is yet to walk among, and embrace, the victims who have suffered at the hands of his brother priests.

He has made some [strong statements](#) on clerical predators and set up the advisory commission. But more than statements or symbolic poses this issue, above all others, demands concrete actions.

As far as I am concerned, the jury is still out on Cool Pope Francis until he opens the Vatican's full archive of documents about its response to sex abuse, ensures due compensation is paid to the Church's many victims and holds church leaders to account for their failure to protect the most vulnerable.